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COVID Vaccines May Cause MS + Heavy Metals Raise Autism Risk + More

The Defender's Weekly Science Digest delivers a roundup of the latest research on children's health, including studies on vaccines, drugs, chemicals, pesticides and lead exposure.

By Angelo DePalma, Ph.D.



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COVID vaccine triggers nerve damage, MS

Multiple Sclerosis and Optic Neuritis triggered by COVID-19 mRNA; Neuroimmunology Reports, Jan. 1, 2024.

Brazilian researchers have uncovered two cases of serious nerve damage in patients who received messenger RNA (mRNA) COVID-19 vaccines.

The first case involved a 25-year-old woman presenting weakness on her right side plus lower limb pain, [sensory impairment](#), difficulty walking and bladder trouble one week after the shot. These symptoms, plus imaging tests, led to a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS).

The patient was hospitalized, treated with [steroids](#) and released with a prescription for [dimethyl fumarate](#), an MS drug. No mention was made of her current status.

The second case was an 8-year-old boy who, 12 days after his vaccination, developed blurred vision in both eyes. Examination revealed optic disk swelling and brain magnetic resonance imaging revealed three brain lesions.

Symptoms completely resolved after five days of steroid treatment.

The authors of the case studies concluded: “Diseases or symptoms triggered or linked to this new vaccine technology must be reported and studied.”

Folic acid supplements reduce Kawasaki disease risk

Maternal Serum Folic Acid Levels and Onset of Kawasaki Disease in Offspring During Infancy; JAMA Network Open, Dec. 28, 2023.

Children of women who took regular [folic acid](#) (vitamin B9) supplements at any point during pregnancy were, overall, at 34% lower risk for developing [Kawasaki disease](#) before age 1.

The risk reduction was somewhat lower — 24% — for women who took folic acid only during the first trimester, but that result was not [statistically significant](#).

Kawasaki disease, which mainly affects infants and young children, involves systemic blood vessel inflammation and lymph node enlargement. Studies have failed to uncover genetic or other obvious risk factors, but [recent reports](#) have implicated folic acid deficiency.

Low blood levels of folic acid also have been associated with an increased risk for [birth defects](#), heart and circulatory diseases, cancer, depression and dementia.

Folic acid [occurs naturally in many foods](#). It is also found in [fortified grains](#), but this [food source](#) uses a synthetic form of folic acid — a [laboratory chemical](#) not found in nature.

Some experts believe that the best form of folic acid for pregnant women is [methylfolate](#), the most usable and active form of the vitamin.

Common tranquilizers linked to miscarriage

Benzodiazepine use during pregnancy and risk of miscarriage; JAMA Psychiatry, Dec. 27, 2023.

Taking [benzodiazepine tranquilizers](#) at any time before the 19th week of gestation increases the risk of miscarriage by 69%, according to a Taiwanese study.

Benzodiazepines include such well-known brands as Xanax, Valium and Librium.

Researchers examined records from more than 3 million pregnancies, of which 4.4% resulted in miscarriage. Results were consistent regardless of the duration of benzodiazepine use or possible complicating factors, such as taking other [drugs](#).

Wide differences were seen, however, among benzodiazepine drugs. For example, the additional risk was 39% for alprazolam (brand name Xanax), but 152% for fludiazepam ([Erispan](#)).

Investigators concluded that the increased risk was seen regardless of the drug's dosage or how long the women took the drug.

One could argue that women who need tranquilizers are already in an unhealthy mental state, which could contribute to miscarriage risk. However, a [2012 U.K. study](#) showed otherwise. Those researchers reported a 65% rise in miscarriage risk in women who took benzodiazepines compared with women with the same psychiatric diagnosis who did not take the drug.

Autism diagnosis: The eyes have it

Development of Deep Ensembles to Screen for Autism and Symptom Severity Using Retinal Photographs; JAMA Network Open, Dec. 15, 2023.

[Artificial intelligence](#) (AI) analysis of [retinal photographs](#) may one day provide objective [screening](#) for [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD) in young children, according to a Korean study. The method may also provide clues about current or future symptom severity.

Using a historical dataset, researchers first trained an AI engine to distinguish between children with confirmed [ASD](#) and those with “typical” (without ASD) development.

When presented with retinal images from a new set of patients who had undergone a clinical ASD evaluation, the AI engine distinguished ASD from “typical” cases 100% of the time.

AI plus retinal scans did somewhat worse (74%) in predicting symptom severity. This performance might be improved by imaging more of the retina (the study examined only a small area) and by controlling for pre-existing conditions and medication use.

AI-based ASD diagnosis would improve currently practiced, highly resource-intensive diagnostics, according to the authors.

Heavy metal raises risk for ASD

Exposure to heavy metals in utero and autism spectrum disorder at age 3: A meta-analysis of two cohorts with enriched likelihood of autism; British Medical Journal via medRxiv; Dec. 5, 2023.

University of Michigan-led researchers reported that prenatal exposure to the [heavy metals](#) cadmium and [cesium](#) raised the risk of [ASD](#) and non-ASD [neurologic development problems](#).

Investigators looked for cadmium and cesium levels in the urine of women trying to conceive and who already had an autistic child. This unusual study design was similar to experiments involving test animals specifically bred to develop an illness (known as an animal disease model).

When the newborns were 3 years old, they were assessed for ASD or other neurodevelopmental disorders using two different diagnostic protocols.

[ASD diagnoses](#) were similar, averaging about 20%. Non-ASD neurodevelopment diagnoses were more variable, with 43.5% confirmed through one set of criteria but just 11.5% confirmed through the other.

The risk was highest for early-pregnancy exposure regardless of the exposure level. Late-pregnancy exposure also increased risk but not to [statistical significance](#).

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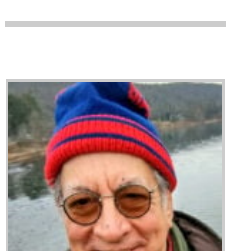
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Angelo DePalma, Ph.D., is a science reporter/editor for The Defender.

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Heavy metal exposure as a cause of autism would certainly explain why vaccines can cause it. Also, the eye changes in ASD individuals is very intriguing. It would seem that whatever is causing the brain changes is also causing changes in the eyes.

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